

The Rule of Benedict

Relevant and Appropriate

The Christ-centredness of the Rule and of the life to which it gives rise is overwhelming. Christ stands at the head of every avenue. . . . Christ is the beginning and the end, the ground of my being and the goal of my seeking. With Christ all things become possible; without Christ nothing makes sense.

—ESTHER DE WAAL¹

† A BENEDICTINE PRACTICE FOR THIS CHAPTER

As you read, think about other “rules” that you’ve encountered:

- What’s different about the Rule of Benedict?
 - What ideas about the Rule introduced in this chapter catch your attention? Why are they important to you?
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Who was Benedict? What is his Rule all about and why was it written? How does Benedictine spirituality relate to who we are as Christians? As Episcopalians or United Methodists, Presbyterians or Roman Catholics? Does Benedict’s teaching have value to us today? We’ll explore these questions in this chapter, as we look at Benedict and his times, explore the Rule and its main teachings, and consider its impact on Christian tradition. First we’ll take a brief look at the development of monasticism in the centuries prior to Benedict, learning about the tradition which he inherited.

A Brief Look at the Origins of Monasticism

Saint Antony and the Roots of Monasticism

Christian monasticism was born in the barren and inhospitable deserts of ancient Egypt in the late third to early fourth centuries. While men and women before him lived in solitude close to towns, a young man named Antony

went deep into the Egyptian desert in search of God and a life dedicated to Christ. *The Life of Antony* was written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century. When Antony was between eighteen and twenty, one Sunday morning on his way to the Lord's house he was pondering how in Acts some sold all they had and placed the money at the feet of the apostles for those in need. Just as he was walking into the church he heard the gospel lesson where the Lord said to the rich man, "If you would be perfect, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."² Antony gave away all his possessions, leaving everything behind for the solitude of the Egyptian desert where he sought God, pursued virtue, and at every turn, battled the Devil. Athanasius tells wonderful stories about this gentle and single-minded holy man's quest for God who "urged everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ,"³ an instruction that Benedict included in his Rule (4.21; 72.11).

Antony became the father of Christian monasticism, inspiring men and women to dedicate their lives to the search for God. These ardent Christians in love with their Lord ventured into the desert and became our Desert Abbas (Fathers) and Ammas (Mothers), imparting wisdom that we continue to draw on today. Many practices in the Rule of St. Benedict have as their source their holy way of life, having been handed down from generation to generation. Closing *The Life of Antony*, Athanasius writes, "Therefore, read these things now to the other brothers so that they may learn what the life of the monk ought to be."⁴

Monasticism Grows—Communities Form

While many Desert Abbas and Ammas lived an ascetic life as hermits, gradually like-minded individuals gathered together, creating the first monastic communities. One such individual was Pachomius (290–346), considered to be the founder of cenobitic life—monastic living in community. Seeking to "learn and do God's perfect will,"⁵ he established a number of monastic communities in Egypt which grew to include over five thousand monks!⁶

The torch of monastic living in community was carried forward by others such as Basil (330–379), who advocated this form of living as a lifelong commitment.⁷ Establishing communities in what is now Turkey, Basil wrote two sets of *Rules* while abbot of his community that are on Benedict's own "Recommended Reading List" in chapter 73 of his Rule. Basil also became bishop of Cappadocia. And so we now turn to Benedict, his life and times.

The Life of Benedict and His Rule

A Time of Uncertainty and Turmoil

Benedict (480–547⁸) was born into a world of turbulence and violence. The fall of Rome in 410 CE had shocked the civilized world. The onslaught of

“barbarian” tribes brought about the official end of the Western empire in 476, with the deposition of Romulus, the last emperor. After an extended peace under conqueror Theodorix, king of the Ostrogoths, Italy was again ravaged by war. The sixth century was an age characterized by danger, mass injustice, dislocation of population, and the apparent collapse of almost all high culture.⁹ Not even the Church was spared disruption as theological controversies raged. Distracted church leaders had to contend also with political turmoil. It seemed that there wasn't a sovereign or ruler who wasn't either an atheist, a pagan, or a heretic.¹⁰ It was into this chaos that Benedict brought the promise of an ordered, Christ-centered life.

Benedict Forms Communities

Benedict was born around the year 480 in the Umbrian province of Nursia in Italy. What we know of Benedict's life comes from the second book of *Dialogues*, written in the late sixth century by Pope Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great. He describes Benedict's family as one of high station. Sent to Rome to study, the young man quickly abandoned the life of a scholar when, Gregory writes, “he noticed that many students fell headlong into vice. Wishing to please God alone, he went in search of the habit of a holy way of life.”¹¹ After several years in a small village where he sought to live an ascetic life, Benedict withdrew to an area near the town of Subiaco, where he lived for three years as a hermit in a hillside cave. Gregory tells us he became known for his holiness and wisdom throughout the neighboring area: “He inspired many people to gather there to serve the almighty God—so many, in fact, that he built twelve monasteries there with the help of Jesus Christ, the almighty Lord.”¹²

After threats on his life, the results of jealousy, Benedict traveled to Monte Cassino in the imposing mountains of the central Apennines in Italy. Tearing down pagan temples within the walls of an ancient fortress, he formed a new community and remained there for the rest of his life. We believe that Benedict wrote the Rule for the monks of Monte Cassino. His sister, Scholastica, established herself nearby with her own community of nuns, and it was said that the two met once a year. Benedict died in 547. Forty years after his death, the monastery at Monte Cassino was destroyed by the Lombards. Today the relics of St. Benedict may be found at the abbey of St. Benoît-sur-Loire in France.¹³

The life of Benedict presented in Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* is not a biography as we know it today but a literary form called “hagiography,” a way of writing about the lives of the saints that focuses on stories and wondrous accounts of miracles. While we may question the accuracy of these accounts, we may heed the love and reverence they show toward Benedict. Here's one wonderful story.

During a time of famine the severe shortage of food was causing a great deal of suffering in Campania. At Benedict's monastery the entire grain supply had been used up and nearly all the bread was gone as well. When mealtime came, only five loaves could be found to set before the community. Noticing how downcast they were, the saint gently reproved them for their lack of trust in God and at the same time tried to raise their dejected spirits with a comforting assurance. "Why are you so depressed at the lack of bread?" he asked. "What if today there is only a little: Tomorrow you will have more than you need." The next day about thirty hundredweights of flour were found in sacks at the gate of the monastery, but no one ever discovered whose services almighty God had employed in bringing them. When they saw what had happened, the monks were filled with gratitude and learned from this miracle that even in their hour of need they must not lose faith in the bountiful goodness of God.¹⁴

The Creation of the Rule

At the time that Benedict wrote the Rule, monasticism was three hundred years old. He inherited a tradition that began with Antony and incorporated ideas from several other rules. Following the Rules of Pachomius in Egypt and Basil in Asia Minor, he stressed the importance of being in a community and not living either in isolation or as a wanderer. He carried forward the main theme of the Rule of Augustine of Hippo (354–430)—that monastic community is about love, the very purpose of monastic life.¹⁵ Benedict also drew from a famous rule known as the "Rule of the Master," removing material that did not follow his view of community and leadership or that he considered punitive, offering a more moderate approach. He added new material he felt was important, such as the qualities leaders of the monastery should possess.

Benedict's message was: Find God by being in relationship with one another. Achieve holiness by being normal. Base your faith on the changelessness of God and of God's love and empowerment.¹⁶ Relate in a healthy way to yourself and keep that relationship in its proper proportion. Recognize that your role as a Christian is to love God, to serve others, and to seek eternal life.

It is this model that Benedict brought to the Western Church and to us. One reason why the Rule is so pertinent to our lives today is that he emphasized living together in one physical place and remaining solidly faithful to that place and to the people there. All of us already live "in community": family, marriage, friendships, committed relationships, church families, the workplace, religious organizations, neighborhoods, and cities.

Benedict wrote his Rule for the monks of his own monastery. He had no thought or idea of establishing a monastic rule that you and I, over fifteen centuries later, would consider valuable for our own lives. Yet within a century or two after his death in 547, Benedict had become the patriarch

of Western monasticism and his Rule the most influential in the Western Church. By the high Middle Ages (eleventh–thirteenth centuries), most of the monasteries of the West had adopted his Rule.

Benedictine monasteries became beacons of light and learning in a world of violence. As the communities grew during the medieval period, they became the extensive complexes that we are familiar with today. One hundred or more monks would live in a monastery that would have a great church on its property. When pilgrims and visitors came to these places of worship, the monasteries interacted with the world. Abbots, who were the leaders of the monasteries, often became political figures with great power.

Pressures from the world outside brought change and great wealth. Over time many monasteries became lax in fulfilling the way of life as directed in the Rule. Yet there have always been individuals who sought to truly live the Rule of Benedict. In the eleventh century the Cistercians were established as an offshoot of the Benedictine houses. They sought to bring about reform and a return to following the original Rule, with an emphasis on contemplation.

What Is the Rule of Benedict?

Structure of the Rule

Imagine you're holding your checkbook, or, better yet, take your checkbook out and look at it. Imagine a book about an inch larger in length and width and about one-quarter inch thick. This is the size of Benedict's Rule—with standard-sized print!

Benedict's Rule, originally written in Latin, includes a Prologue and seventy-three chapters. Each chapter of the Rule has a title that explains the content of that chapter: for example, "The Tools for Good Works," "The Sleeping Arrangements of the Monks," "The Reception of Guests," and "Distribution of Goods according to Need." Most modern translations divide these chapters into numbered "verses" for easy referencing of the content just as we do the Bible.

In *St. Benedict's Toolbox*, I use several translations of the Rule as well as my own paraphrase of verses. References to the Rule are given in parentheses after a quotation or a paraphrase by noting only the numeric chapter and verse. For example, "(42.5)" means the "Rule of Benedict, chapter 42, verse 5." I will add RB before the chapter and verse when Scripture appears within that verse of the Rule. For example, "(Gal 5:16; RB 4.59)".

Content

What is the Rule of Benedict all about? Bottom line, the Rule gives instructions for how to seek God in community. Here are the broad topic areas that I find in his Rule:

Liturgical Instructions for the Divine Office, or Opus Dei (“the work of God”). These are the eight daily community prayer services that compose the main occupation of the monastics. (The Divine Office is covered in chapter 6 of this book.)

Roles, Responsibilities, and Procedures for Community Members. While Benedict provides some specific instructions for jobs in the monastery such as for the abbot or abbess (the superiors of the monastery), the cellarer who distributes food and utensils to the monastics, and the porter who greets visitors at the gate of the monastery, his main concern is with the personal qualities needed by each person and how they are to treat others. Benedict’s focus is on *being* more than on *doing*. Most of us will never be a superior of a monastery, but we can take on the Christ-like qualities that Benedict asks for those in leadership roles.

How to Live Together in Community. An important focus of the Rule involves relationships: how monastics should treat one another and conduct themselves to promote peace and harmony in the community. Again we can bring his practical instructions into our own lives as we seek to promote peace and harmony where we are. Addressing logistical matters in community, Benedict also includes directions for such things as sleeping arrangements, meals, food, clothing, work, discipline, and the process for joining the monastery.

Spiritual Direction. Benedict encourages monastics—and us—to take our relationship with God seriously and to actively nurture it. He provides directions for such disciplines as prayer, study, Lenten practices, and living with humility before God.

The Rule has theme words: roots, belonging, community, fulfillment, sharing, space, listening, and silence.¹⁷ The Rule also addresses questions from “How do I relate in love to other people?” and “How do I find meaning in what I must do each day?” to “What are the priorities of a Christian life?” In a Prologue and seventy-three chapters, Benedict explains how we can live a Christ-centered life with others. Noted Anglican author Esther de Waal summarizes beautifully the content of the Rule:

It is all about love.
It points me to Christ.

Ultimately the whole meaning and purpose of the Rule is simply, [in Benedict’s own words] “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ.”¹⁸

The center of the Rule is Christ, the cornerstone is Scripture, and the focus of the Rule is how to live in loving relationship with God, self, and others.

The way to live, Benedict states in his Prologue, is by following the Gospels (Prologue 21), especially Jesus's main directive to love one another. That's why the Rule is so relevant for all Christians. Benedict sees that the way to holiness is through other people.

The Power of the Rule

The Rule is practical, down-to-earth, and easy to read. Benedict's gentleness and understanding flow through the words, reminding us to also be gentle and understanding. He is always realistic about what his monks can do. "Therefore," he writes in the Prologue, "we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service . . . we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love" (Prologue 45–47). Timothy Fry wrote that Benedict "shows an extraordinary understanding of weakness, a compassion for those who fail or are troubled or distressed, a delicate patience even with the hard of heart . . . his Rule is deeply human and evangelical."¹⁹

Sr. Joan Chittister likens the Rule to a railing that you can cling to while climbing the stairs. We all need some kind of railing to hold onto in this life: one that supports both our physical and spiritual journeys, one that will better help us to live out our Baptismal Covenant and follow Christ in our daily lives.

Last but not least, the Rule is very much about living an ordinary life well. Thomas Merton, monk, priest, and spiritual writer, said the essence of the Rule is "doing ordinary things quietly and perfectly for the glory of God."²⁰

I encourage you to purchase a copy of the Rule of Benedict for reference as you read this book. (See "Suggested Reading" at the back of the book for various editions of the Rule. The Rule is also available online at www.osb.org.²¹)

The Impact of the Rule of Benedict

The Benedictine Influence on Christian Church Tradition

The Christian Church and all its many denominations and individual churches share their roots in the early church formed by the apostles. Monastic communities grew from these roots too, taking an active role in forming and transmitting Christian tradition and practice. Whether or not your branch of Christianity preserves the liturgical practices of the monastic houses of the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions, all of us share, in various forms, the practice of prayer and contemplation that is rooted in monastic tradition.

If you're not Anglican (Episcopalian in the US) or Roman Catholic, I encourage you to explore the influences of the Rule of Benedict within your own tradition. Tool #3 in the Toolbox of this chapter will help you make connections between your tradition and that of the Rule.

The Benedictine Influence on Anglicanism

The Benedictine tradition dominated the spiritual landscape of pre-Reformation England, and had a profound influence on the development of Anglican spirituality. Most cathedrals in pre-Reformation England were connected with Benedictine monasteries. Marked by moderation and good sense, Benedictines discouraged extremes of outlook or behavior. With the Incarnation as its starting point, Benedictine spirituality seeks to draw out the invisible divine presence in the visible world and fosters “a deep, single-minded attachment to the person of Jesus Christ.”²² Those of us who are Episcopalians or from another branch of the Anglican Communion have inherited this English spirituality. Our roots are in Benedictine England. Anglican writer Martin Thornton points out that the spirituality of the Rule is built on three key moments: the Eucharist, the Divine Office, and personal prayer—the very same priorities as seen in our prayer book.²³ The Anglican Church has been called a kind of generalized monastic community with the Book of Common Prayer preserving the foundations of Christian monastic prayer, but simplified it for contemporary use outside a formal monastic community.²⁴

The importance of worship is a Benedictine concept that was passed down over the centuries. In the Rule, Benedict explains in meticulous detail the order of worship for the Divine Office, the eight services of corporate prayer, beginning long before dawn and continuing into the evening. During the Reformation of the sixteenth century, many Reformed churches dismissed this monastic corporate prayer. Thomas Cranmer restored the Daily Office to the people and to its place in the English Church when he included Morning and Evening Prayer—“matins” and “evensong”—in the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549. This tradition has continued in the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer today. This prayer book also provides “descendents” of the early Offices in a noonday prayer service as well as a late-evening service called “Compline.”

Community, so important in the Rule of Benedict, is also important in the Anglican tradition. In what Robert Hale, a Roman Catholic Cistercian monk, calls a *leitmotif* (a dominant or recurring theme), “the church terms itself the Anglican *Communion*; its key liturgical text that unites the faithful is the Book of *Common Prayer*; and the traditional Anglican designation of the central, unifying sacrament is Holy *Communion*.”²⁵ To be in community is an essential part of Benedictine life and thought. It’s easy to see why many Anglicans are so comfortable with the Rule of Benedict!

The Relevance of the Rule for All Christians

Benedict called his monastery “a school of the Lord’s service” (Prologue 45) for those who wished to become monks and renounce their own wills. But

you and I are invited too. Benedict's "little school" can help us seek God in our lives.

People from many and varied branches of the Christian Church have written of the deep influence of Benedict and his Rule on their lives. What they say about the power of the Rule, not only for spiritual matters but for total life formation, speaks beyond any denominational boundaries to anyone who seeks to live a Christ-like life. Noted author Kathleen Norris, who describes herself as "thoroughly Protestant," became a Benedictine oblate and writes of the influence of the Rule:

Quite simply, the Rule spoke to me. . . . The Bible, in Benedict's hands, had a concreteness and vigor that I hadn't experienced since hearing Bible stories read to me as a child. [Speaking of the difficult times that she and her husband were having as freelance writers, Norris continues.] It surprised me to find that a sixth-century document spoke so clearly to our situation, offering a realistic look at human weakness, as well as sensible and humane advice for us, if we truly wished to live in peace with one another.²⁶

Episcopal priest, author, and retreat leader Elizabeth Canham shares her love of Benedict's Rule and its practical application to her life:

I fell in love because this man spoke of a life in a hospitable community, of simplicity, balance, and an ordered way of living designed to create an environment that fosters freedom to grow fully into the persons God created us to be.²⁷

Wil Derkse, a Dutch Benedictine oblate (someone associated with a monastery who hasn't taken monastic vows), writes of the practical application of the Rule:

I have experienced that the Benedictine spirituality is a veritable treasure-trove of old and yet new insights which may be incarnated anew, concerning good leadership, informed decision-making, fruitful communication, good human resource management, salutary conflict resolution, a careful management of one's possessions, a blessed lifestyle which provides space. An attractive aspect is that Benedictine spirituality directs itself so distinctly toward what needs to be done here and now, at this moment.²⁸

Esther de Waal, noted Benedictine author and Anglican laywoman, follows Benedict "to discover how to be human now today, tomorrow and for the rest of my life."²⁹ The Rule is relevant to any age, she says, because it "continually points beyond itself to Christ himself."³⁰ Not century-specific, it is Christ-focused, helping us live according to the Gospels, which is why the Rule is so important for us today. For Benedict, the Rule was a means to this end. As Christ is brought into hearts and minds century after century and

generation after generation, so too the Rule offers relevant guidance and inspiration for all times.

The Rule of Benedict is a guide to the great ideas and questions of life in every age. . . . Instead of a power that is exploitative, [Benedict] calls for a power that is open and developing. He calls for an obedience that says, “I am not my own God. God is God.” He treats the question of human dignity in the face of a world that is highly oppressive. He talks about community in a time when individualism is rampant.³¹

The Rule is a way to open our hearts and lives to the divine light.

Basil Hume, a Roman Catholic cardinal who led a Benedictine monastery for twenty years in England, wrote of our society’s dilemma: “our great skill and power . . . on the one hand,” but “our inability to get things right on the other.”³² He believed the greatest folly of all—and the cause of the dilemma—was “to forget that above us and beyond us there is a voice that calls us all the time to a change of heart, and to a new beginning.”³³ For him, the Rule was the way to open our hearts and lives to the divine light. Benedict “speaks of conversion in a period when we are faced with a narcissism so deep that one-third of the world consumes two-thirds of the goods of the world and we don’t even have the grace to blush. He speaks of simplicity to a human nature bent on acquisition and consumerism. He talks about stewardship in the face of rampant unmindedness of the resources of people and the earth. He talks about union with God when people are concerned only with the secular.”³⁴

As followers of Jesus Christ, we want to move beyond self-absorption, and we want our lives to mean something—to God, to ourselves, and to others. The Rule provides a way to do this within the context of the Gospels and with Christ at the center. Basil Cardinal Hume said that the Rule “makes it possible for ordinary folk to live lives of quite extraordinary virtue.”³⁵

Listening to the Ordinary

The “Guide to Using This Book” began with the opening words of the Rule, asking us to listen with the ear of our heart and to welcome and practice the teaching of the Rule. To listen is a key message of Benedict’s Rule: to listen for God, to listen to God, and then to respond to God’s call in love. We listen in prayer. We listen to Scripture. We listen to the people, to the situations, to the joys and the struggles that make up our lives. We listen especially to those who mentor us in our spiritual journey—spiritual directors, clergy, trusted friends, members of our family who are on the walk with us and our faith tradition. Michael Casey describes this listening as *bending* the ear of the

heart. We listen attentively to the outward words intently to “hear the internal echo of the words spoken.”³⁶ We open ourselves and set aside any resistance that comes from preconceived ideas and ways of being. We listen lovingly and openly.

The Rule of Benedict asks us to listen for and to find God in the ordinary, daily stuff of life. We don't have to be fancy or do extraordinary feats. God is before us and within us, waiting to be found. The challenge is that every day we have so many things to do, and the crush of work can leave us hurrying through one task to move on to the next. But is it possible instead to do our work on one level yet reflect with our mind and heart on where God is in the task? Can we allow the task before us to reveal itself as an opportunity to find God?

Earlier I posed the question “How can we sit at the feet of the Lord with Mary and listen?” One way is to cease rushing through the tasks and demands of life, always thinking ahead to the next thing or to tomorrow or worrying about yesterday. Instead, we can try to focus on where we are right now and become fully present to God in our tasks, our interactions with others, our work, and our play. This is a powerful way to sit at the feet of the Lord with Mary and listen with the ear of the heart. We dare to look for God in the most mundane activities and trust in God's presence there. We live in the present moment, focused on what we're doing. We put on a heart of love and do our work for love of God and others.

As yeast causes dough to rise so that it can be baked and served to nourish, so too the practices that Benedict encourages in his Rule act as “leaven in the loaf.”³⁷ We're transformed from within so we can nourish not only ourselves but those around us, near and far.

Summing Up the Chapter

Following up on the chapter practice, what ideas caught your attention? Here is a quick summary of some key points in the chapter.

- A long tradition of monasticism that began with Antony influenced Benedict.
- People in all branches of the Christian Church can learn from and be guided by Benedict, for the Rule is rooted in Scripture and shows us how to follow Christ.
- To listen is a key directive in the Rule.
- Benedict encourages us to find God in our relationships and in the ordinary things of daily life.



TOOLBOX

The Rule of Benedict: Relevant and Appropriate

This Toolbox is designed to give you an opportunity to interact with the material you've just read. While most tools in the Toolbox give you actual ways to apply Benedict's teaching in the Rule, the tools on the following pages address several areas that may impact your learning as you continue reading *St. Benedict's Toolbox*.

TOOL #1: Questions about the Rule and Its Application to My Life

Purpose of the Tool. To give you an opportunity to write down any questions that you might have after reading the introduction to the Rule.

Background on the Tool. As you read about the Rule, some questions may have surfaced about the Rule or about how it may apply to your life. By identifying these you can look for answers as you continue reading.

The Tool

On a separate sheet of paper or in your journal, write down questions that surfaced as you read this introduction to the Rule. Keep these questions handy as you read and look for answers as you read the book.

TOOL #2: Identifying Words with Negative Connotations

Purpose of the Tool. To uncover hidden resistance to words or concepts that are foundational to this study of the Rule of Benedict.

Background on the Tool. Some words and concepts in Benedictine spirituality can initially raise the hackles of twenty-first-century Americans who are known for their rugged individualism, independence, competitiveness, and focus on goals. Words like *stability* (better to keep my options open), *obedience* (Ouch!), *rule* (too confining), *vows* (better to have flexibility), *ordinary* (not me), and even *monastery* or *monastic* may be less comfortable to us than words like *self-expression* or *self-development*. Best to get these out in the open to clear the way for the Benedictine interpretation!

The Tool

Looking back through this chapter, list any words or concepts that you think might have a negative connotation in the twenty-first century.

Now, put a check by any that may be a "red light" for *you*.

Read and think about each word that you checked. Ask yourself the following questions about each of the words:

- What do I feel when I say the word?
- What is the meaning of the word as I think about it now?
- What is the negative connotation for this word or concept? For example, does it imply a loss of individuality, independence, or autonomy? Does it feel dangerous somehow?

Now, as you continue, keep an open mind to discover the Benedictine meaning of these words. Remember that Benedict *is* advocating that we set aside our individual agendas for the sake of nurturing and strengthening our relationships. Can we do it?

TOOL #3: The Influence of St. Benedict on Church History and Tradition

Purpose of the Tool. To encourage those readers who are not Anglican or Roman Catholic to explore the influence of Benedict and/or monasticism in their church's history and tradition.

Background on the Tool. Learning is always more meaningful if we can find points of connection with our life: that's what *St Benedict's Toolbox* is all about. Discovering the influence of Benedict's Rule on your church's tradition may make the Rule more meaningful to you.

The Tool

Here are some suggestions for finding out if and how Benedict, his Rule, and monasticism may have impacted the history and liturgical practice of your church.

- Locate books about the history of your denomination. Use the index in each to find references to Benedict and/or monasticism.
- Do the same as the above for your liturgy.
- Talk to your priest or minister about the influence of Benedict and monasticism.
- Explore spiritual practices that are encouraged by your church or denomination. Keep these close at hand as you learn about the Rule to recognize influences or synergies.

~ *Interlude* ~

Paying Attention to the Breadcrumbs

How can we seek and find God's plan for our life? Spirituality writer Debra Farrington suggests that one of the best ways is found in the story of Solomon in 1 Kings. When confronted with a dilemma, Solomon prayed for a "hearing heart," to help him judge wisely.³⁸ This is precisely what Benedict recommends in the Prologue to his Rule: each member of the monastic community is to attend to Benedict's instructions with the ear of their heart so that they can find God's will in even the smallest and most ordinary circumstance of life.

For the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the center of everything physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. "What Solomon sought—and what we seek too—is for God to use our bodies, feelings, minds, spirits [and other people] to show us the right path, not just for big decisions but all the time."³⁹ We need to use "our hearing heart" every day, Farrington writes, to exercise this way of hearing in the small things so that we'll be better able to hear in the big things. The hearing heart is attentive to all the ways God is present in our lives, and notices the "metaphorical breadcrumbs" God leaves for us to follow.⁴⁰ Farrington suggests how you and I can develop this hearing heart so that we see all those breadcrumbs:

Learn to notice the gifts God gave you and watch the way your own life story is developing if you want to know more about God's will for you. God may not put a burning bush in your path, but there will be plenty of other clues about what God may want you to do or be.⁴¹

I find great comfort in the idea that knowledge of God's will often comes gradually. If I believed otherwise, I might waste my whole life waiting for a stunning, one-time event like the apostle Paul had on the road to Damascus, where "a light from heaven flashed around him" (Acts 9:3–4) and the Lord spoke to him. Though this kind of conversion will probably not happen to most of us, this doesn't mean that God has abandoned us. As you and I look back on our lives, we can see plenty of clues as to where God has been leading us. Once as I struggled with finding God's will and plan for me, my former pastoral supervisor offered some simple advice: "Look back over your life," she said. "You'll see the threads there that led to today."⁴²

In one of what I call my "former lifetimes," as an instructor of service representatives for Indiana Bell, I wrote a training manual that gave exercises and job tips to help the reps do their job better. The realization recently hit me that this is exactly what I'm doing now with this book—only the subject matter is different. I'm helping you—and me—take steps to become better

followers of Jesus Christ, using Benedict's Rule to help us fulfill our Baptismal Covenant and to love God, neighbor, and self.

As you and I look back over our lives, questions like the following can help us to recognize the breadcrumbs that God had placed along the way for us to follow: "What happened? Who were we with? What happened next? What did it feel like?" As we answer these questions, we can explore related threads woven through our experience. We can identify the gifts God has given to us—our talents as well as our spiritual gifts such as joy, love, humor, compassion, perseverance, generosity, and self-control—and how we have used these gifts. That can lead us to questions like this: "Is God, through the breadcrumbs of my life right now, drawing me in another direction, or the same direction? What is the next logical step?" Remember that the breadcrumbs are there not only for the big directions in life. They're placed by a loving God to help us with the challenges of the ordinary yet holy work we do every day.

As we follow the breadcrumbs, we also pay attention to our bodies, which may have even more to tell us. Stress responses such as shallow breathing or tenseness can be clues in discerning the wrong path from the right one.⁴³ When we have made a right decision, our bodies will tell us through calmness and steadiness. A friend tells me that her back is her right-or-wrong indicator: when her lower back aches she knows she needs to take another direction. My guess is that all of us have some kind of body signal of right or wrong: tightness in the throat, tension in the neck, or the inability to concentrate. Be aware of the connection between daily events and decisions and your body.

The hearing heart also needs to be with others. In a time when many monastics lived a hermit's life of isolation, Benedict advocated living in community where the monastics could support one another as each sought God. Others can help us along the path to holiness, too, as we seek God's plan. People in our communities—at home, church, workplace, or school—can help us to see our lives from a different perspective or can confirm that we're moving in the right direction. We need to seek out people who can guide us as we discern what is happening in our lives. All are God's messengers who can expand our hearing beyond our own predispositions and desires. We can assist others in the same way, for life is not to be lived for ourselves alone, but for God and in service to others.

Finally, prayer and study are important tools that can help us develop and nurture a hearing heart. We approach prayer in openness to hear what God is saying to us. We read Scripture with openness, knowing that God will speak to us through the Word. *Lectio divina*, or divine reading, is a Benedictine form of prayer that uses Scripture as a resource for conversation with God

and is an important way to develop a hearing heart. In the book of Isaiah, God says to the prophet and to you and me, “Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live” (Isa. 55:3).

Just follow the breadcrumbs!



TOOLBOX

Awareness in the Journey

We often have difficulty making decisions about what to do, where to go, or what path to take. It's even harder when we haven't thought about where we've been and where we are now. These tools can help you become more aware of these issues.

TOOL #1: Following the Breadcrumbs

Purpose of the Tool. To help you look for the breadcrumbs in your life, either short term or long term.

Background on the Tool. Breadcrumbs are those markers and events in our lives that draw us along God's path. Paying attention to these helps us discover that God is always present, leading and guiding. Reflecting back on our experiences will help us see how God was present then and how God continues to be present now.

The Tool

First, identify the major events of your life. Write them on a separate piece of paper or in your journal.

Now, ask yourself these questions: What happened? Who was I with? What were my feelings? What did I learn? What happened next?

In looking back over these events, can you see any threads? These are the “constants” that may underlie your experiences. Were there skills that you used throughout or skills that you developed?

Now think about your life today.

- How do your past experiences relate to who and where you are today?
Are you using some of the same skills today?
- What are the breadcrumbs that you see as you look back over the last several months or years?
- Is God, through the breadcrumbs of your life, drawing you in another direction, or perhaps the same direction?
- Looking at the breadcrumbs, what might God's path be for you now?
What is the next logical step?

Remember, you are not alone in all this. God gives the meaning. Benedict wrote this in his Prologue to the Rule:

What gentler encouragement could we have, my dear brothers and sisters, than that word from the Lord calling us to himself in such a way! We can see with what loving concern the Lord points out to us the path of life. (Prologue 19–20),⁴⁴

TOOL #2: Living Reflectively

Purpose of the Tool. To encourage you to take time for reflection during the day.

Background on the Tool. In the Prologue to the Rule, Benedict encourages us to keep our eyes and our ears open in order to see and hear where God is calling us every moment of the day (Prologue 9), both in the little things and in the big, important things. To do this we need to develop the skill of living reflectively, in awareness of what we're doing or have done. Living reflectively is another way to hear God's voice among the many that compete for our attention.

The Tool

Develop the skill of observation. Mentally step outside yourself throughout the day and gently assess your attitudes and actions. Do the same when in conversation with others. Before going to bed, think about the day, looking gently at who you were and what you did throughout the day.

This skill of self-observation takes a long time to develop. I know I'm not there yet! Will you join me in working on this practice?

A CLOSING THOUGHT

As is often noted, the very first word of Benedict's Rule is *Listen!* And the last word in the Rule is *pervenies*, "you will arrive" (73.9). So we see that Benedict's message about life, the way of life he presents in the Rule, may be summed up in the sentence "Listen and you will arrive!" We can easily apply this to our own lives.

—Margaret Malone, SGS⁴⁵
